

PM's virus inquiry was a lose-lose call

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Scott Morrison's thought bubble was a barbecue pleaser. But it was bad strategy that has blown the chances of getting an international investigation and further set back Australia's relationship with China.

Scott Morrison and Foreign Minister Marise Payne have handily demonstrated over the past fortnight [how not to get an international inquiry](#) into the origins and early management, or mismanagement, of COVID-19.

It has been a useful lesson for students of strategy in how the government in future might better advance Australian national interests.

Of course, as the Prime Minister correctly said, [there is nothing wrong in wanting an inquiry](#). When social interaction resumes, around the barbecue everyone will sensibly agree that we should know more about what happened, who knew what when, and what action was taken. Certainly, the World Health Organisation will be involved in this once the emergency has passed, and Australia's WHO representatives will, in concert with many others, be supporting this work.

We have also learnt to our horror that the world lives daily on the precipice of deadly epidemics and pandemics. Information flows and international co-operation are essential, as is domestic preparedness, against any future pandemics. Many lessons are already being learnt. A major one is that no country can act alone to protect itself, no matter how isolationist its leader's instincts may be.

In his call for an inquiry, Morrison was expressing to the feelings of many, if not all, Australians. That is part of any prime minister's responsibilities. The thing is, however, that when he speaks, he does so as the Prime Minister. The rest of the world listens and takes seriously what he says.

At a time when most of the world, with the notable exception of the Trump administration, is [looking for co-operation across borders](#) to manage the pandemic and plan for economic reconstruction, Morrison's comments will be seen as divisive and unhelpful. It is clear the target is China and, whether fair or unfair, this will be seen as another Australian mini-me statement.

Conservative commentators have rushed to the Prime Minister's defence, gushing with excitement that Australia has "stood up" for itself. What they mean is that [Australia has stood up to China](#). These days, that is the only expression of national assertiveness or independence that is required.

Maintaining good relations with China is not a policy end in and of itself. Having good relations with any country is a means to advance Australia's national interests. These relationships are pursued and kept in good order because it is advantageous for Australia to do so.

Foreign policy is not about being nice for its own sake. Being nice is just another instrument of statecraft. It just happens to be a more important instrument for smaller countries that have fewer arrows in their quiver of statecraft.

Australian governments should seek to maintain good relations with China because it is more in our interest to do so than not to do so. Failure in this complex task represents a failure to advance the national interest. In maintaining good relations with great powers, it is not just the bilateral economic and trade benefits that matter. No aspects of Australia's security are unaffected by China. The same, of course, is true for the United States.

If the Prime Minister wished to advance Australia's legitimate interest in understanding what happened last December in Wuhan – as well as elsewhere in the world, where so many governments were slow to react when the alarm was first sounded, albeit tardily – then he should have first been able to discuss this with President Xi Jinping. He could not do so because the bilateral relationship is frozen. Yet any initiative such as this that bears so directly on Australia's interests will require either China's active support or at least its tacit acquiescence.

The chances of either of these things happening now – and they were never good to start with – have been blown. Australia has set back further its relations with China, and not achieved an inquiry. It has been lose-lose.

The exercise of successful strategy involves identifying achievable objectives that can be matched by the resources required to obtain the desired outcomes. Australia could never have initiated, and internationally co-ordinated, an inquiry on its own. It could have at least tried to build a coalition of support among like-minded countries before publicly blurting out its demand for an inquiry, rather than a call-around after the event.

Like-minded countries that may have been supportive are now likely to be leery of being too closely associated with an Australian initiative. Our highly professional and hard-pressed diplomats, who will by now have been tasked to whip up

support for the Prime Minister's thought bubble, will find their jobs that much harder.

On a matter of global importance of this scale and sensitivity, Australia needed to be in good company. We weren't. Many leaders around the world would agree in principle with such a proposal, but as good strategists they would want to know answers to such basic questions as under whose competency such an inquiry would be held – the United Nations Security Council or WHO? Or, if neither, are we to construct a new piece of international architecture for this purpose? Questions of authority, legitimacy, and composition would all need to be answered.

No quarter should be given to economic coercion, so Beijing's official inferences that Australia could face consequences over its call for an inquiry should be firmly rebutted, as they were by Payne. Such threats and actions by China do it no good and harm its standing and soft power. When used against Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, or the Philippines, threats of economic coercion have proved counterproductive.

Just when it looked as if relations between Australia and China could not possibly get any worse, they have.

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